New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1953

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"Oklahoma!"

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Oklahoma!"

The New York Times

September 1, 1953

'Oklahoma!' Revived at City Center

Celebrating Rodgers and Hammerstein's Official Week

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Nothing could introduce a new theatrical season more attractively than a revival of "Oklahoma!" Thanks to the enterprise of the City Center, that is exactly what we have—an amiable revival that opened there last evening. Just by the merest coincidence, it comes as the major event of Rodgers and Hammerstein Week, which has been officially promulgated by the Mayor and will be suitably observed by every honest citizen until next Sunday midnight. For the next five weeks there will be four Rodgers and Hammerstein productions operating simultaneously in New York. There will also be a few productions by other authors who are happy enough to have one play on at a time.

* * *

Unless the Mayor is forbidding criticism this week, it is necessary to point out that the current performance is subject to improvement. It lacks the crackle and breezy assurance of the finest theatre work. Some of the individual performers are good company—such as Florence Henderson as Laurey, Ridge Bond as Curly, Harris Hawkins as Will Parker, and especially Mary Marlo as Aunt Eller, who has the rhythms and sauciness of "Oklahoma!" in every gesture. As the odious Jud, Alfred Cibelli Jr. is not exactly good company, but he does give a forceful performance.

In addition to these good performers, there are a number of especially good scenes when the native exuberance of "Oklahoma!" pours off the stage. But superannuated theatregoers who can remember as far back as the original production may be excused for hoping that this revival acquires more polish and finish as it goes along, and that Mr. Hammerstein's affable lyrics get a clearer reading. Maybe Miss Marlo might serve as the model for the perfect "Oklahomaite."

* * *

Not that any performance could lose the glories of this Rodgers and Hammerstein masterpiece. It was their first work together. There has been much fine work from them during later years. But none of it puts a tarnish on the golden score of "Oklahoma!" or the wonderful lyricism of the book and verses. The whole work retains the freshness of that opening song. As orchestral music, the score would be a joy in its own right. For Russell Bennett, who scored in the instruments, brought to his work as much gusto as Mr. Rodgers imparted to the melodies. In the current revival, Peter Laurini is conducting an excellent orchestra with considerable enthusiasm.

With Agnes de Mille's country dances, the current company does pretty well. The strutting and the festivities come easily to the performers. But the first-act nightmare ballet—one of her finest creations—is danced sloppily. You cannot have a full-textured "Oklahoma!" without some very skillful dancing. For Miss de Mille made a contribution to the Rodgers and Hammerstein material that enriched it and cannot be treated as secondary now.

In this corner of this morning's newspaper we shall celebrate Rodgers and Hammerstein Week by being genuinely grateful for what they have written and by urging them to keep their standards of production high and immaculate. The current revival does not do their writing full justice on the stage.

N. B.—If there is any chance of having "Carousel" revived, Rodgers and Hammerstein Week might be extended to a fortnight.

"OKLAHOMA"

Revival of the musical based on the play "Green Grow the Lilacs" by Lynn Riggs; music by Richard Rodgers; book and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein 2d; staged by Jerome Whyte; dances by Agnes de Mille reproduced by Betty Gour; settings by Lemuel Ayers; costumes by Miles White; presented by Messrs. Rodgers and Hammerstein at the New York City Center, August 31, 1953. The cast:

Aunt Eller.....Mary Marlo
Curly.....Ridge Bond
Laurey....Florence Henderson
Cord Elam.....Charles Hart
Fred.....Charles Scott
Slim.....Charles Rule
Will Parker....Harris Hawkins
Jud Fry.....Alfred Cibelli, Jr.
Ado Annie Carnes..Barbara Cook
Ali Hakim.....David Le Grant
Gertie Cummings..Judy Rawlings
Ellen.....Maggi Nelson
Kate.....Barbara Reisman
Silvie.....Patti Parsons
Armina.....Lynne Broadbent
Aggie.....Cathy Conklin
Andrew Carnes....Owen Martin
Chalmers.....George Lawrence
Mike.....Bob Lord

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

September 1, 1953

THEATER

'Oklahoma!'

By WALTER F. KERR

Eleven Years Young

"OKLAHOMA!" and the American public have been keeping company for some eleven years now. It begins to look as though the affair might last.

By way of breaking in a bright and shining new company for another fling across the country, Rodgers and Hammerstein have ushered their oldest baby into City Center for a five-week stand. It's a great comfort to know that Lemuel Ayers' rolling cornfields still spill onto the stage with all the old magic, that the fabulously flowing score falls as freshly as ever on the ears, and that at least some of the dances ricochet right off the proscenium with all the old zest.

In fact, in a couple of instances this latest reincarnation of the American theater's long-run champ seems to me to have a decided edge on the 1951 visit to these parts. One of them is a blonde, corn-fed (I mean that in the nicest possible way), apple-cheeked lass named Florence Henderson. Miss Henderson plays Laurey and she is the real thing, right out of a butter-churn somewhere. She torments her man with a wonderfully stubborn and come-and-get-me air, she snarls out the 'seches' and 'airs' and 'yows' of the mock-Oklahoma dialect as though she'd been born with a spray of corntassel in her mouth, and when she gets around to "Many a New Day" and "People Will Say We're in Love" she sings her heart out. You not only like this Laurey, you believe in her; and, for as long as "Oklahoma" finally manages to run, I never expect to see a better one.

If the show is a notch up anywhere else, it's probably in the all-round vigor of the company, in its earnest and enthusiastic determination to think the whole thing through once more. Last time I caught a glimpse of this eleven-year-old strolling bonanza, there was a faintly routine and ritualized aura about it; the cattle weren't the only things standin' around like statues. But the boys and girls at City Center are going in for honest labor. "Oklahoma" skips, leaps, and hurls itself across the stage with brash and bouncing new enthusiasm.

* * *

Is it exactly the show we all saw when we were a lot younger? well, no. (This is just for the record; I don't want my grandchildren thinking they're seeing the precise inspiration I've been yapping about all these years, and looking at me in pity.) The dances, for instances, don't look as though Agnes de Mille had put a finger, or a metronome, to them in quite a long while. The outlines are still there. The gathering of the girls to the melody of "Many a New Day" was a revelation in its own time, and remains one of the most haunting fragments ever invented for musical comedy. With just slightly better dancers, and with just a little tightening of line, it would still lift you out of your seat. The first-act ballet is rousing full-scale work, too; and the second-act opening, "The Farmer and the Cowman," is rich and rollicking. But there's always a shade of raggedness, an ounce of slack, to disconcert you and to make you start remembering how it really was.

* * *

The balance of the company aren't as exhilarating as Miss Henderson, but they're an agreeable lot. Ridge Bond's Curly starts off in lightweight fashion, and betrays a disturbing conviction that a grin will do for any and all emotions, but hits a good firm stride in the macabre humors of the Smokehouse scene with Jud.

Mary Marlo is a salty Aunt Eller, Barbara Cook is a suitably flighty Ado Annie, Harris Hawkins is an easy Will Parker, and Alfred Cibelli jr. turns in a plausibly menacing Jud. David Le Grant is, at this point, waving a stick pretty frantically at the already broad antics of Ali Hakim, and some of the show's comedy takes fright and disappears under the thrashing. But when Laurey is pouting, and pointing out that she doesn't recognize her principal romantic rival "since she got so old" the warm-hearted character humors of the piece come bubbling back.

It's still a beautiful morning.

Daily Mirror

September 1, 1953

'Oklahoma' Back Again And Still Champ

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Like Ol' Man River, "Oklahoma!" just keeps rolling along. The Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein musical landmark opened its eleventh season last evening at the New York City Center. It's booked there for five weeks, but judging by the lines at the box-office it could stay as long as it pleases.

THIS IS "Oklahoma's" third visit to the White Way. The original production ran here for years, breaking old records and setting new ones like mad. Road and foreign troupes toured. Somewhere, there has always been an "Oklahoma!" running. We doubt that any musical in history has ever earned so much for its sponsors, authors and backers.

The song-and-dance show had gotten into something of a rut, had become almost a matter of shopworn formula when Theresa Helburn, of the Theatre Guild, teamed Rodgers and Hammerstein to transform "Green Grow the Lilacs" into a history-shattering, precedent-setting musical. Because it pioneered new ideas, opened new territory, there were scoffers who called it "Helburn's Folly."

It was even difficult for the Guild to find angels. Playwright Sam Behrman was one of the hardy souls that took a chance. He advanced $5,000 as a friendly gesture to all concerned, and we're not mathematician enough to figure out his returns from that extremely fortunate investment.

"OKLAHOMA!" not only has left an indelible imprint upon the American stage, but it has created stars galore, as well. The current version, smartly directed by Jerome Whyte, boasts a company of attractive and gifted young players, along with a handful of capable veterans.

Florence Henderson is a charming Laurey. She has a true and appealing voice. Ridge Bond, actually born in Oklahoma, is a manly and likable Curley. Barbara Cook is cute as Ado Annie. David Le Grant does well by Ali Hakim. Alfred Cibelli, Jr., dances and sings the role of the villainous Jud effectively.

Maggi Nelson and George Lawrence step Laurey and Curley in the dream ballet gracefully and with the right dramatic touch. Cathy Conklin, who impersonates the child in the sequence, is delightful. She should film well. Mary Marlo, Charles Bart, Harris Hawkins, Judy Rawlings and Owen Martin also merit salutes.

• • •

THE SETS and costumes seem as fresh as they were at the premiere 11 years ago. But that is to be expected, as Rodgers and Hammerstein are gentlemen of taste. They are not ones for shoddy.

The return to Broadway of "Oklahoma!" launched "Rodgers and Hammerstein Week," proclaimed recently by Mayor Impellitteri. It was a gala event. It gives this fabulous pair four hits at one time on the Main Stem, the others being "South Pacific," "The King and I" and "Me and Juliet."

At a $3 top, "Oklahoma!" is a real entertainment bargain.

DAILY NEWS

September 1, 1953

'Oklahoma!' a Happy Beginning for A New Season at the City Center

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The sunniest and happiest musical play of our time, "Oklahoma!" began a five-week engagement at the City Center last evening, and there could have been no nicer way to commence a new theatrical season. In the 10 years since this Rodgers and Hammerstein work was first produced by the Theatre Guild, "Oklahoma!" has set so many records that it has become a statistic—but it also has retained the human qualities which make it a lovable and wonderful show. Its heart is light and its mood is gay, as always. And nowhere else can one find a list of musical numbers to compare with those of Act I.

If your memory needs refreshing, these numbers are, in order, "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'," "The Surrey With the Fringe on Top," "Kansas City," "I Cain't Say No," "Many a New Day," "It's a Scandal, It's an Outrage," "People Will Say We're in Love," "Pore Jud," "Lonely Room" and "Out of My Dreams."

New Management.

Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein 2d are now the proprietors of "Oklahoma!" which was their first collaboration. A while back they bought it from the Guild and soon they will be making a movie of it. Their production at the City Center is a nice one—fresh and clean inside and out. Under the direction of Jerome Whyte, who is as accustomed to turning out duplicates of "Oklahoma!" as Ford is of Fords, the present version follows the original staging of Rouben Mamoulian and Agnes de Mille with great fidelity. This is wise, because a decade ago Mamoulian and Miss de Mille helped enormously in the creation of a masterpiece.

Nice Company.

Many a new star has followed the original company, which included Alfred Drake, Joan Roberts, Howard da Silva, Celeste Holm, Joseph Buloff and Betty Garde, and many a ballerina has succeeded Joan McCracken as The Girl Who Falls Down. The present troupe is generally a good one, with Ridge Bond, Florence Henderson, Alfred Cibelli Jr., Barbara Cook, David Le Grant and Mary Marlo.

The words and music are splendid, the dances are distinctive and humorous, the Lemuel Ayers backdrops are perfect in their simplicity and the Miles White costumes are bright and right. But best of all, perhaps, is the book, or plot. It will always remain fresh and alive because it was adapted from a good play, Lynn Riggs' "Green Grow the Lilacs."

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

September 1, 1953

Time Fails to Dim Luster of 'Oklahoma!'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The Messrs. Rodgers and Hammerstein were the hottest thing in Manhattan last night. "Oklahoma!" was the reason, as it racked up their fourth simultaneous musical on the main stem.

So much has already been made of this record that the true excellence of "Oklahoma!" on its own has been neglected. The truth is that though The Boys have gone farther with their wonderful innovations, and done richer and more sophisticated shows, they have never really done a better one.

You might expect it to seem a trifle dated, it was so extreme an innovation in its early years. But here after a decade it holds your heart and your eyes, and the Lord knows, your ears, as they have never been held in our day.

Partly Cloudy.

It is sunny and bright and smiling, but its story clouds over with dire suspense. The ballet, so talked about in '43 and '44, still sends shivers down your spine as the cowboy Curley loses the lovely Laurey to the sick-minded farmhand Jud, even though you know it is all a dream.

A lot of us were happily weeping last night, because it was such a good time and because the songs were flooded with so many memories of this dramatic decade. And a lot of youngsters were discovering R. and H. in the happiest imaginable way.

The company is what the high-stepping cowboys would have called a "beaut." Florence Henderson is a lovely, fresh-looking youngster, playing Laurey as if she had been born on a stage

Ridge Bond is the Curley now, handsome and sturdy and blessed with the voice to rouse you with "Oklahoma!"—the song itself—till you want to get on your feet and join in.

Alfred Cibelli Jr. is the dour Jud, who broods so comically over his death, then later dies in combat at the wedding. Mr. Cibelli deals in magnificent voice with